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Social competences in university teachers

Competencias sociales del docente universitario

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Tiburcio Moreno-Olivos[1]

[1] Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana - Cuajimalpa Unit - Communication Sciences and Design Division - Department of Information Technology - Mexico City - Mexico.

Corresponding author: Tiburcio Moreno-Olivos. Departamento de Tecnologías de la Información, Unidad Cuajimalpa, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. Avenida Vasco de Quiroga 4871, Colonia Santa Fe, Delegación Cuajimalpa de Morelos. Phone: +52 55 58146500, ext.: 3534. Ciudad de México. México. Email: tmoreno@correo.cua.uam.mx.

| Abstract |

The objective of this article is to reflect upon the professional competences that university teachers require in order to respond appropriately to the demands of contemporary society.

This is a specialized documentary review that seeks to lay a thematic foundation and theoretically define analysis categories. It was found that when the issue of teaching competences is addressed, usually priority is given to disciplinary and pedagogical skills, while social competences are neglected. However, since teaching is a collective social practice, the relationships and interactions between individuals are essential; hence, it is concluded that teachers should develop social competences that will prevent the limitation of their performance during the educational process, a limitation that can severely damage the comprehensive training of their students.

Regarding the methodology, the criteria for the inclusion of the bibliography were mainly based on the relevance of the reviewed sources related to the topic under study (the search found that social competences are generally not considered when referring to the professional skills of university teachers) and on the theoretical perspective shared by several cited authors. Their current validation or the language in which they were published were considered, although, some recent studies in English were included.

Keywords: Professional Education; Competency-Based Education; Faculty; Learning; Social Skills (MeSH).

| Resumen |

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo reflexionar acerca de las competencias profesionales que los docentes universitarios requieren para responder de forma apropiada a las demandas de la sociedad contemporánea.

Se hace una revisión documental especializada para fundamentar la temática y definir teóricamente las categorías de análisis, encontrándose que, por lo general, cuando se alude a las competencias docentes se suele dar prioridad a las disciplinares y pedagógicas, obviando las sociales. No obstante, siendo la enseñanza una práctica social colectiva, las relaciones e interacciones entre los individuos son esenciales, de ahí que se concluya que es necesario que los docentes desarrollen competencias sociales para no limitar su actuación durante el proceso educativo, lo que perjudicaría bastante la formación plena e integral de sus alumnos.

En cuanto a la metodología, los criterios para la inclusión de la bibliografía se basaron fundamentalmente en la relevancia de las fuentes consultadas en relación con la temática tratada (en cuya búsqueda se encontró que por lo general las competencias sociales no se abordan cuando se alude a las competencias profesionales del docente universitario) y la perspectiva teórica compartida por los distintos autores citados. No se tuvo en cuenta la actualidad ni el idioma en que se publicaron; no obstante, se incluyeron algunas referencias más recientes en inglés.

Palabras clave: Educación profesional; Educación basada en competencias; Docente; Aprendizaje; Habilidades sociales (DeCS).

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Introduction

For the past three decades, a vast number of studies have dealt with the role of teachers from different perspectives: reflective professionals (1,2), intellectual critics (3,4), researchers of their own practice (5-8), or agents of change and social transformation (9,10), to name a few. Without doubt, this is a field of extensive study —although it has not been always the case— whose relevance has increased in recent years because of the value given to education as a strategic tool for societal development and progress.

Even though education has attracted attention since time immemorial, it seems that this issue is never obsolescent, which may have to do with a nodal point, that is, improving schools necessarily involves improving education. To this end, the role of teaches must be studied and understood.

However, this analysis cannot be extensive if teachers are considered as an abstract entity, decontextualized, timeless. It is necessary, then, to think of teachers as individuals who exercise their practice in a new scenario characterized by complexity, contradiction, uncertainty and continuous change. The analysis of the work carried

out by these professionals should also address the influence of the socio-cultural context and the institutional conditions under which they work, which unquestionably determine, to a large extent, their potential for decision and action.

Some authors (11) have proposed teaching competences essential to successful performance in contemporary society. The questions then arise: why is it important to develop competences other than disciplinary and teaching competences? Are there other teaching competences? What are some of the social competences essential for good teaching? Of course, for the majority of teachers in Latin American universities, and bearing in mind their professional life cycle, this will involve an extensive process of restructuring; they (like all other professionals) will need to recycle some of their competences and develop new ones at a time when the concept of the mandate is clear: changing or die dying becomes fundamental. *Tertium non datur*.

Recent curricular models for higher education require teachers with an increasingly competitive, extensive and diverse professional profile, which is necessary for specifying clearly and precisely the form of both innovative effort and eagerness for change in the contents of their institutional projects. (12) However, there is a certain disparity between innovative curriculum proposals and a staff that continues to maintain rather outdated teaching concepts and practices, in spite of the growing offer of continuing education to unsystematic, standardized and somewhat irrelevant teachers.

This article focuses on reflecting on the social competences that teachers require to meet the challenges of higher education in the second decade of the twenty-first century, a period marked by a series of constant, vertiginous changes that barely give us time to process and assimilate them in a reasonable manner.

Indeed, the knowledge society, that is, the world in which teachers do their work, has significantly altered the lives of individuals. The increasingly widespread use of information and communications technology has led knowledge to have a shorter period of effectiveness; furthermore, individuals have almost immediate access to diverse and varied sources of information, thus changing their work habits and lifestyles.

Judging by the few changes it has undergone over the centuries, the school is one of society's most conservative institutions, ill-equipped to cope with change and innovation. Some say (13) that the contemporary school does not require partial reforms, but a profound change; some go as far as to say that the school "needs to be reinvented." What they mean is that another type of school should be considered and that it should be open to the world; connected to the real life; focused on developing the competences that students need to fit in, and to transform their surroundings; be aware of the conditions and interests of students; focus on their learning needs rather than on the teacher's training needs; maintain a close relationship with the community where it is found; and see families as partners in the education of their children, and not as adversaries.

On the other hand, the school, once the jealous custodian of accumulated knowledge, has strong competitors that store, organize, disseminate and present the information to young people in a more attractive form. Facing this new panorama, scholastic institutions have no choice but to "jump on the bandwagon of change" if they want to capture the attention of new students. Still, conservative as they have been since ancient times, they are finding this transition process extremely difficult. Consequently, it is of great urgency to rethink the function of teachers and review their new (and old) competences in light of the changes mentioned above. (14)

The weight of tradition

Improving the quality of teaching is a complex task; it is sometimes the result of conflict and is not exempt from strong resistance on the part of those involved. Zabalza-Beraza (15) identifies a series of convictions that affect teaching and that have shaped what most university teachers traditionally believe: a) learning to teach by teaching, b) being a good university teacher is enough to be a good researcher, c) learning is a task that depends exclusively on the student and teachers should devote themselves to teaching (explaining) issues (the material), since learning or not is the responsibility of students, and d) the quality of a university depends not so much on the courses it offers as on its available resources: good laboratories, good libraries, enough new technological resources, among others.

In the same vein, another previous work (14) identified a set of myths that largely condition (explicitly or implicitly) the pedagogical concepts and practices of many teachers, fact that undoubtedly represents a great hindrance to change and betterment of university education: a) good teachers are born, not made; b) to teach, all you need is to know the subject; c) the responsibility of the teacher is to teach, while the student's obligation is to learn; d) if humanity was educated under the aegis of a traditional method in the past, why a model that has given such good and proven results should be changed for one that does not offer full guarantees of effectiveness; e) universities are attended by adults with well-defined goals and a definite training project in mind. The job of teachers is not to motivate learning through their teaching; f) teaching is not a science, but an art that depends on the sensitivity, intuition and style of each teacher; g) any and all teaching can produce valuable learning; h) experience in teaching is a guarantee that ensures good teaching practices.

Disassembling these time-honored ideas, firmly rooted in the minds of many university educators, indisputably represents a gargantuan effort for the simple reason that being willing to eliminate these beliefs and build new ones instead requires teachers to give up their certainties and find a good cause for committing to change. Renouncing one's convictions is usually a painful process that takes a big dose of energy, and there is no absolute guarantee that the new ideas will work in practice.

The new university scenario

Contemporary university cannot remain aloof and indifferent to what happens around it. Everything that occurs on the outside has an effect on it and forces it to be alert and attentive to how changes influence its work. The traditional university, closed to the outside world, where teachers remain isolated in an "ivory tower" with their own coterie, more concerned about the students' grades than about their training and comprehensive development, teaching a small and rigid group, is a picture that no longer fits well within society's demands and expectations for institutions of higher education. The teaching profession is not immutable, and its transformations should involve the emergence of new competences or making emphasis on recognized competences. Any reference point tends to go out of style because practices change and because the way of viewing them is transformed.

Forty years ago, topics such as the habitual manner of dealing with differences, formative assessment, teaching situations, reflective practice, cooperative learning, and situated teaching or metacognition were not addressed. (11) The idea of changing or dying is not a new mandate for the university, but, perhaps, its true dimension is clearer now than it was before. What is happening in Europe with the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), to name one example, makes clear that competition among universities is growing stronger. The journal of international rankings that positions them on a scale according to their prestige and social recognition, pressures them to become part of that select group of world class educational institutions.

Recently, many universities have undertaken a process of transformation by changing their curriculum and educational models,

updating their plans and curricula, creating a model of university social responsibility, designing operating policies for teaching and research, introducing an institutional system of tutorials, implementing student mobility programs, creating a system of scholarships to support socioeconomically disadvantaged students, among other actions.

Faced with this sometimes hectic wave of changes, it would be good to remember that "innovation is not just doing different things but making things better." (15) Research on educational change has shown *ad nauseam* that not every change represents an improvement, since it is very difficult to maintain the changes until a new culture has become established. Many of the actions aim at renewing the teaching field because innovation in teaching has become an institutional policy subjected to many pressures and not a few contradictions.

It is true that, until recently, teaching, in itself, was not a relevant issue for the university, but things have begun to change, and improving the quality of education has become a priority all over the world.

Teaching competences for the twenty-first century

The issue of competences in education is complex and controversial, and could be analyzed from different philosophical, psychological, sociological, epistemological and political perspectives (16-19), definitions and classifications; however, classifying them seems easier than agreeing on their conceptualization. In any case, this work seeks to emphasize the social competences of university teachers, which are defined as a set of cognitive, socio-emotional and emotional processes that support behaviors that are evaluated as skillful or suitable by social agents, considering the demands and constraints of the context. (20)

Social competences should not be understood in terms of specific skills or results that may also vary according to the culture. It is necessary to have a broader vision of interpersonal relationships, integrating thoughts, feelings and behaviors. There are two levels of analysis: molar and molecular. While social skills consist of a set of observable (molecular) behaviors such as smiling, social competence presupposes other complex and global (molar) components, which may not be directly observable, for example, the ability to make decisions about when to show a certain social behavior. (20)

These competences are important because teachers must prepare students to succeed in their careers as a way of achieving their own prosperity and that of others, and as a matter of justice and inclusion by making these opportunities accessible to students of all races, social backgrounds and with varied capabilities. The prosperity of humankind depends on our ingenuity, our ability to harness and develop our collective intelligence regarding the core attributes of the knowledge economy, which include: inventiveness, creativity, problem solving, cooperation, flexibility, ability to develop networks, ability to cope with change, and commitment to learning throughout life. (21)

The following paragraphs present some of the key social competences for teaching, which generally are overlooked or subsumed in others, taking for granted that a good teacher needs to have mastery of the disciplinary content and a solid repertoire of didactic-pedagogic abilities. These social competences were selected from a systematic review of specialized bibliography considering their inherent value for the training of individuals.

Ability to adapt to change. In the new scenario of the so-called knowledge society, human beings require the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn. (22) The concept of learning throughout life (lifelong learning) becomes an imperative for the survival of the human species. Teaching is a special area for the development of social competences (working cooperatively, knowing how to listen, sensitivity to accept others' points of view, respecting the rules and norms of the group, adjusting to the needs of others, making decisions and learning to defend one's own ideas, among others). Nevertheless, to promote these competences in their students, teachers need to develop them first in themselves.

Commitment to the principle of learner educability. This competence refers to the confidence in the capability of humans of being educated. (23) If teachers understand their students' abilities for learning, and if they communicate this feeling to them, they will awaken in their learners the motivation and confidence they need to continue learning. The big bet should be a firm belief that all students —not only the best ones— have the potential to learn; although there are individual differences, every person can learn according to their own ability and at their own pace.

Recognition and respect for student diversity. This refers to the sensitivity to accept the heterogeneity of groups and consider it as a resource,an opportunity to learn and not as an encumbrance with which the teacher has to deal. No school group has ever been uniform, but in the modern world, diversity has burst into the university, posing serious challenges and demanding the acquisition of new teaching competences, the reinforcement of other competences, and perhaps recycling others. This heterogeneity in the classroom contrasts with a faculty unprepared to deal with diversity through their teaching. As a result, disagreements between teachers and students may arise, creating situations that often culminate in experiences of scholastic failure.

Ability to collaborate with others. Collaborative work is one of the most perverted ideas in education; everyone understands something different and it is usually trivialized. It is thought that only getting teachers together is enough to make collegiality work. (24,25) While it is true that "two heads (or more) are better than one," to achieve this it is necessary for the teaching staff to develop competences to decentralize itself and abandon the individualism that prevents it from growing and taking advantage of socially-distributed cognition. (26) Teaching is a task that, by its very nature, demands cooperative work and joint efforts, as well as sharing information and abilities useful to address the students comprehensively. Collaborative cultures are closely associated with greater student success as well as with the moral support that encourages teachers and keeps them on their feet as they deal with the difficulties of change. (27,28)

Ability to build a democratic scholastic culture. A democratic school is a fair school, committed to the democratic reconstruction of its culture so as to integrate all its students properly, without discrimination, and to offer them a good (valuable, useful) education that will enable them to participate actively in society. Reconstruction refers to a process that begins with the current situation of each school, and never ends; it is always an unfinished project because the integration of all differences is a utopian goal. (29) This requires commitment to the abatement of violence, insecurity and the alienation to which many students are subject today. It is a struggle to build a school that promotes justice and democracy in everyday life.

Ethical behavior in interpersonal relationships. Educational work intrudes upon the lives of other people and can influence them to accomplish specific tasks through its chosen means. Thus, educational practices are not all equal considering the values they seek to promote. In other words, establishing a situation/problem is not the same as organizing merely informative courses; proposing differentiated groups or workshops does not have the same ethical scope as group-level management —it is indeed quite different; developing a "student council" does not have the same meaning as only notifying a regulation. Whether we like it or not, there are teaching practices and active and ways of operating that could neglect some members of the community if teachers take them into account in their daily practice. (30) Because of this, both the ethical suitability of

the means and the technique become aspects to consider. For example, teachers decide how they will talk to their students, what access to the knowledge they will allow for learners, and what criteria will be used to assess or evaluate their performance. Each of these decisions involves technical and ethical judgments. The sense of change has a moral dimension and an intellectual dimension: changing the lives of the students requires as much concern, commitment and passion as intellectual knowledge.

Taking genuine interest in others. This competence demands interest in the development and growth of the student, which requires displaying the capacity for empathy, plus the ability to listen and know how to observe. Many students live in impoverished environments, with hardly any motivators for learning. For a large part of these learners, school is their only chance of survival. Respect for human nature and its condition are inalienable. A genuine interest in others means accepting and loving them as they are, and giving them the support needed to improve their lives. After all, that is the core of education. Teachers should have the ability to put themselves in their students' shoes, but without trying to replace or impose their own worldview.

Conclusions

The social competences described for teaching do not represent a model of what an ideal "good university teacher" should be. If we admit that teaching is a complex and multidimensional task (31), it would be contradictory to try to compress the educator into a kind of "teacher-robot" with a fixed and immutable set of skills. On the contrary, this has to do with desirable, but not universal, capabilities. Teaching is an art, and as such, it requires a good dose of intuition and common sense. Many of the events that take place in the classroom are unpredictable and demand that the teacher constantly adjusts the lesson plan to respond better to the students' characteristics and needs. Therefore, teacher's competences include a wide range of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values necessary for performing the arduous task of educating others. (32) For the twenty-first century, key abilities that enable leadership in the new knowledge economies are a comprehensive part of the personalized learning agenda. This century must also encompass deeper virtues and values such as courage, compassion, service, spirit of sacrifice, long-term commitment and perseverance. (33)

This work shortly addressed the weight of a certain tradition which has shaped the mentality and conditioned the pedagogical practices of a good number of university teachers. Also, the need to go beyond these practices to meet the demands of contemporary society has been established, and these demands have to do with fulfilling one of its main functions: teaching. Still, it is not enough just to give classes on how to teach, as there is an increasing demand for quality. The hardest part of academic change is not how to start, but how to make it last and disseminate it.

Given the current conditions in which many university teachers work, it is not always possible to achieve the moderation and fairness required by such demands. This complex panorama raises doubts about the ability of universities to fulfill their teaching role, while it forces the faculty to rethink the effectiveness and results of their professional performance. The inaction and the indifference toward this harsh reality is not only a sign of incompetence, but also an immoral act, since what is at stake is the lives and future of students.

As a recommendation, a regional agenda that includes the development and updating of social competences in teacher training programs is proposed, which together with didactic-pedagogical and disciplinary competences, could promote a better professional development of university teachers.

Conflicts of interest

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